If there was a ever a time when the Montana State University-Northern men’s basketball team needed to hold court at home, this would be it.

With the Frontier Conference seemingly wide open right now, the Lights have a golden opportunity in front of them, starting tonight with a huge showdown with No. 16 Carroll College. Northern wraps up its only home stand of the month on Saturday night with a game against Rocky Mountain College.

The Lights enter tonight’s 8- p.m. tipoff with the Saints at 2-1 in conference play and 13-5 overall. MSU-N is coming off its first loss of the conference season, a 69-64 setback last Saturday at Western. But the Lights and head coach Shawn Huse know they are playing well, and yet, they know just how tough this weekend will be.

“We are still at a point where we’re a team that has only two guys who have played in conference games before, and even they didn’t start until this year,” Huse said. “So we’re still approaching games where we’re just trying to get better each and every night. I think we’ve done that so far, but that’s what we’re continuing to strive for, and this a weekend where we have two home games against two very good opponents, and we know we’re going to have to be at our best, and continue to get better.”

Two good opponents indeed. But also two bitter rivals.

The Saints (2-1, 12-4) come to Havre fresh off a weekend where they swept Westminster and LC State at home. Carroll jumped from having no votes in the NAIA Poll all the way to No. 16. And the Saints might just be that good. They have the reining NAIA player of the Week in 6-5 forward Andy Garland, now a junior, Garland a league-best 19 points to go along with six rebounds. And while he’s a bruiser inside, he can also shoot the three very well, which makes him as dangerous an offensive player as there is in the Frontier.

“He really doesn’t have a weakness you can attack,” Huse said of Garland. “He’s physical, he’s versatile, he can go inside and shoot it outside, he gets his hands on a lot of rebounds, he plays good defense, he’s just really complete.”

And while Carroll struggled last season, Garland certainly isn’t alone. Chase Goedecke, a 6-8 junior and 6-6 Tony Dalton give the Saints a big front line, while young guards like Ben Cutler and others give Carroll a quick and talented back court.

Northern will try to counter that with its own outstanding back court. The Lights get double-digit scoring from Shaun Tatarka, Devin Jackson and LaVon Myers, and come into this weekend’s games as the top 3-point shooting team in the Frontier.

But Huse knows shooting won’t be the only key to victory tonight, or Saturday night. The Lights must play patient and sound defense against two very efficient offensive teams.
“Carroll is getting really good play from a lot of different people,” Huse said. “They have a strong starting five, but it’s their depth this year that I think has made them such a versatile team. And they are a very patient offensive team. They don’t waste a lot of possessions and they really execute their stuff well. They have just been playing outstanding basketball this season, and they present a tough challenge for our team, especially defensively.

“But both teams really do, because Rocky has been very efficient offensively as well,” he added. “In both games this weekend, playing really tough defense is critical to our success, but we also have to play smart defense. We have to be very patient and very disciplined to stay with these two teams.”

Rocky’s record might not show it, but the Bears are still a stalwart in the Frontier, and they come to Havre with much of the same team that really put an end to Northern’s NAIA tournament hopes a year ago in Havre. The Bears sit at just 1-2 in league play and 8-11 overall entering tonight’s game at Great Falls. But at the same time, they return a host of talented players like guard E.J. Ross, Orlando Westbrooks and Anthony Carter. Add to that 6-9 transfer Sergio Trocha, who leads the league in rebounding at almost nine per game, and the Bears certainly can’t be overlooked on Saturday night.

"Once we play Carroll, we immediately have to turn all of our attention to Rocky,” Huse said. "They are a well-balanced veteran team. They don’t just have good players, but those players have a wealth of experience and they know what it takes to play on the road in the Frontier Conference. Their a lot like Carroll in that they do a lot of different things well. They shoot it well, they defend, they rebound, they have good size and their quick. They are also very patient offensively.

The Saints and Lights will battle for first place in the league standings tonight at 8 at the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse. The Lights and Battlin’ Bears also tip off at 8 on Saturday night in Havre.

Tonight’s Frontier Conference men's and women's basketball games at MSU-Northern will be a "white-out". For Northern's games against the nationally-ranked Carroll College Fighting Saints, all fans are being asked to wear all white to the games at the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse. The women's game starts at 6 and the men tip off at 8.